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Obituaries

Socialite painter caught by the romance of Paris and Tangier

Marguerite McBey

Marguerite McBey, who has died aged 94, was the lover of artist Oskar Kokoschka in 1920s Paris, married the celebrated Scottish etcher and painter James McBey in the 1930s, and went on to paint watercolours of Morocco in her 50s.

She was born in Philadelphia. Her father had worked for the family banking house in Mannheim until he emigrated to the United States, where he and an uncle established a successful tobacco business. He and his wife's friends included Nathan Straus, owner of Macy's department store and a distant relative.

Marguerite was educated in Philadelphia, Switzerland and at the Sorbonne. She also studied bookbinding in New York and at the Ecole et Ateliers d'Art Decoratif in Paris. While there she embarked on a passionate affair with Kokoschka, who nicknamed her "Tamarisk".

"I love you so completely that I want to make you my wife, gladly and whenever you please," he wrote to her in August 1925. "I have such complete confidence in you that I will voluntarily let you go away from me again, as dreadfully far and for as long a time as your parents think is necessary, so that they can be convinced that you have not made a mistake and that you want to be united with me."

It was not to be: her father called under-age Marguerite back to Philadelphia. In New York she trained and worked as a photographer before opening a business on West 57th Street, binding books by contemporary writers such as Theodore Dreiser and Anatole France. Her professionalism and devotion were intense: she once spent 120 hours binding a book on Manet. Her creations were exhibited in New York and San Francisco, attracting early praise from the New York Times and Vogue.

Marguerite met McBey at a Philadelphia dinner party in 1931, and in March they were married two hours before sailing for England. The wedding was covered by the London Evening Standard and thereafter Marguerite's dark good looks attracted notices in the British and American press. She was named as one of the New York Herald Tribune's best-dressed women of 1940.

James McBey was among the most successful British artists of his generation — an official war artist during the first world war, he later undertook important private commissions. The couple settled into his imposing home and studio at 1 Holland Park Avenue, in Notting Hill.

McBey had visited Morocco in 1912, and been captivated by the country and its peoples. As Marguerite later explained: "James loved Morocco. He returned there with me in 1932, bought property, and I got to love it too. The strange difference of light, the hard beauty of the country, the charm of the people in their traditional clothes, the leisurely tempo, and the dramatic ambience suited us both."

Eventually the couple moved into El Foolk (the Ark), a substantial property on the Old Mountain, Tangier, although they spent the war years in an apartment in Greenwich Village.

James died in 1959 and Marguerite, who had been much under his influence, began to come into her own. She took up watercolours — "Unconsciously, the challenge of a medium which allows of no corrections drew me like a magnet," she said. "My idea is to capture the thrill of what inspired me. For this you have to get it on to the paper before it disappears or is forgotten. Inspiration can stop in the course of work or light can change in minutes. For years I had watercolours at the ready in every room, like a writer with a pen and paper."

Much of Marguerite's inspiration came from Morocco, but she also journeyed deep into the sub-Saharan desert to paint. Her work was exhibited in Tangier, New York and in London — being transported there in the private jet of the Tangier-based, American tycoon Malcolm Forbes.

Memories of Morocco . . . James McBey's portrait of his wife Marguerite, painted in 1950

Marguerite donated many of her husband's paintings to the Aberdeen Art Gallery — he was born in Aberdeenshire — and to the old American legation in Tangier. She was instrumental in the publication of James McBey's Morocco, and collaborated with Paul Bowles when his last novel, Too Far From Home, appeared, making available sketches from her Saharan notebooks. Much of her family jewellery was given to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and she generously endowed the American School of Tangier with properties and money.

After James's death, Marguerite formed an attachment with Lady Carolyn Duff. According to David Herbert, social arbiter of the Tangerine expat community, "it was a genuine amitié amoureuse — two ladies of a certain age finding a haven in friendship". She also became close to Veronica Tennant, and, from 1976 until her death in 1998, with Nancy Eastman, ex-wife of the American consul-general in Tangier. As recently as 1998 she was photographed by Bruce Weber for Vanity Fair, and Hello! magazine dubbed her "the doyenne of Morocco-based artists".

She was a warm, amusing and unassuming friend to many, and retained a radiant beauty.

Gary Pulsifer

Marguerite Huntsberry McBey (née Loeb), painter, born April 30 1905; died October 21 1999

Claude Bessy

In 1977 in Los Angeles, Claude Bessy, who has died of cancer aged 54, co-founded Slash magazine, the bible of LA punk. Thus did Bessy, writing as Kickboy Face, become a chronicler of that generation. In 1978 the magazine launched its record label, with the Germ's Lexicon Devil. Later signings included Los Lobos, Faith No More and the Violent Femmes. And in 1981 Slash and Bessy's band, Catholic Discipline, featured in Penelope Spheeris's film on LA punk, Decline Of Western Civilization.

He was born in Normandy. In the 1960s, he followed the trail to Afghanistan, visited LA and studied at the Sorbonne — leaving Paris to return to LA in 1968 before the events of that May. He studied film, featured as Frenchy in The Hardy Boys TV series and, in the mid-1970s, set up a reggae fanzine, Angeleno Dread.

With his partner Philomena Winstanley, Bessy moved to England in 1980 and became press officer for Rough Trade Records. The Fall, Virgin Prunes and Cabaret Voltaire could testify to his effectiveness. He also championed LA bands like X, the Gun Club, and the Blasters.

In 1982 he became video DJ at Tony Wilson's Hacienda club in Manchester and went on to become a music video producer, releasing work by the Fall, Virgin Prunes, the Birthday Party and William Burroughs. He later worked for the London comic and sci-fi shop Forbidden Planet, wrote record sleeve-notes — and his distinctive voice featured on records by Sonic Youth, Howard Devoto, Wire's Graham Lewis and trumpeter Marc Cunningham.

Recently, Bessy contributed a chapter to Don Snowden's book on early LA punk, Make The Music Go Bang. In 1987 he moved to Barcelona. He is survived by Philomena and his mother.

Richard Thomas

Claude Bessy, writer, born June 20 1945; died October 2 1999

Rome's hard road for women

Face to Faith

Gordon Urquhart

At the start of the current synod of Catholic bishops in Rome, in what was hailed as a historic move, John Paul II proclaimed three female saints — St Brigid of Sweden, St Catherine of Siena and St Edith Stein — as co-patrons of Europe, joining their male colleagues Saints Benedict, Cyril and Methodius. "I wished to include the same number of female saints," the Pontiff pointed out, in order to show that the church "has always acknowledged the full spiritual dignity of women."

How does this proclamation alter the fact that women have little or no decision-making power in the Catholic church? Is it another empty sop to the growing army of Catholic women angry at their second-class status? Or does it imply that, for the Holy See, the only good woman is a dead woman?

The pontiff has certainly made attempts to convince women of their vital role in the church. He devoted an encyclical letter, Mulieris Dignitatem, to the subject and even addressed a grovelling apology to the women of the world at the time of the UN women's conference in Beijing. He often talks of "the feminine genius" — his term for the unique contribution, never quite specified, that only women can give to the life of the church and humanity.

Yet these high-flown phrases have been seen as suspect, and not only by women. At a synod on religious life in 1994, Archbishop Couture of Quebec, in a speech censored by the Vatican press office, suggested that Rome's extravagant praise of women's "dignity" was "an elegant way of excluding women from the roles in the church traditionally reserved for men". He added that "the anthropological approach underlying these texts appears to be that women are so different from men that they don't even have a share in human nature itself."

Yet John Paul II's tributes to women cannot all be dismissed as empty rhetoric. Some of his best friends and closest confidantes are women. And it is these, the flesh and blood women of Rome — rather than the Brigids, Ediths and Catherines — that give a real insight into the pontiff's true views. He has personally appointed them to various curial bodies charged with such subjects as the family, the laity, culture, ecumenism, the sciences and interfaith dialogue. He has also included a substantial number of women, including lay and married women, in his personal nominees to the synods of bishops.

The sad fact, however, is that the women of Rome are enthusiastic proponents of Vatican policies which are most repressive to their gender. Indeed, many of their views verge on the bizarre. Mrs Mercedes Arzu Wilson, for instance, a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Family, condemns family planning as "the cancer of today's world". She has tirelessly promoted this view as a member of the Vatican delegation to a number of UN conferences.

Her colleague on the Council for the Family, Countess Christine de Vollmer, believes that "the work of women in the home is the basis for the happiness of the whole human race". A member of Opus Dei, she is one of only three women on the 20-strong Holy See delegation to the UN, whose policies on abortion and birth control have been a special target for her wrath. "How can we work for a world of peace when UN agencies themselves are encouraging mothers to kill their own children?" she has demanded. She has condemned sex education programmes produced by the UNFPA as "public pornography".

The women of Rome take a dim view of feminists. Shortly before the UN women's conference in Beijing, at which she led the Vatican delegation, Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon gave her own weird take on the birth of the movement in America. According to Glendon, women outnumbered men in the baby-boomer generation of the late 60s; they were therefore forced to seek partners among older men and turned to the husbands of the "[Bella] Abzug-[Betty] Friedan" generation. As a result, these women — Abzug, Friedan et al — were "dead set against men and at the same time made liberal use of beauty products".

Perhaps the most powerful woman in the Catholic church is Chiara Lubich, the 79-year-old Italian founder of the Focolare Movement. She enjoys a unique position as president for life of an institution which includes 15,000 priests, 60,000 nuns and monks, and — in a branch personally approved by John Paul II in 1996 — 750 bishops. Yet she certainly does not see herself as in any sense blazing a trail. In a TV interview in the 1980s, she declared: "I have never thought of myself as a woman."

While receiving an honorary degree in Argentina last year, Lubich warned that the ordination of women "would be a grave error. Woman has her own specific nature that allows her to have a very important role without imitating men. She is 'her' not 'him'."

Lubich has equally reactionary views on sexual matters. On large families, she points out that St Catherine of Siena was her mother's 23rd child: "If ever there was a woman who could have said 'Enough!' it was certainly the mother of the virgin of Siena. But what a loss to the church and to Italy!" Her notion of sex education consists of advising adolescents to "throw themselves in the snow" when visited by temptations of the flesh.

When asked by Vatican Radio for her views on the Pope's proclamation of three female saints as co-patrons of Europe, Lubich opined that it was "an act of justice". Surely, justice will only be done when Rome gives women full equality, not in heaven but on earth. As matters stand, the women of Rome, far from being a beacon of hope for their sisters, are part of the problem.

Gordon Urquhart is author of The Pope's Armada and a forthcoming book, The World And The Flesh

Weekend birthdays

Not for nothing was **Maggi Hambling**, 54 today, the perfect choice for the sculpture of Oscar Wilde unveiled in London's theatreland last year. She's had a lifelong fascination with the writer, and they share a gloriously camp public image, revelling in excess and passion. But Maggi's the real McCoy: a figurative painter who has worked as a portraitist, landscapist, a painter of myths and — perhaps most importantly — the human figure.

Anyone who saw her acclaimed show in Manchester in 1983 could vouch for her originality, when — in a series of paintings exploring the anatomy and range of laughter — she set out to convey the essence of pure sound and feeling on canvas. Her time as the first artist in residence at the National Gallery brought the same excitement to London.

But painting doesn't come easily to her. For every work the public sees, several others are destroyed. "I don't think I am in control of what I am moved to paint," she once said. "I am trying to create the image which is inside me. As you work, unexpected things happen, so it's like rediscovering what is inside you whilst you are making it."

When not at her own work, she's in the colleges working with tomorrow's artists, a function she enjoys and puts great energy into. Students remember her as an inspiring teacher, strong on personality and humour.

Today's other birthdays: Prof Graeme Barker, archaeologist, 53; **Johnny Carson**, chat show veteran, 74; **Sir John Craven**, chairman, Lonrho, 59; **Roger Jones**, managing director, Woolworths, 62; **Pele (Edson Arantes do Nascimento)**, footballer, 59; **Gerry Robinson**, chairman, the Arts Council, 51; **Anita Roddick**, founder, the Body Shop, 57.

Tomorrow's birthdays: Luciano Berio, conductor, composer, 74; **Caprice Bourret**, supermodel, 26; **Peter Chenery**, secretary, British Council, 53; **Judith Chernaik**, founder, Poems on the Underground, 65; **Jonathan Davies**, rugby league player, 37; **Barry Davies**, sports commentator, 59; **Sir Robin Day**, doyen of interviewers, 76; **Wally Herbert**, Arctic explorer, 65; **Sena Jurinac**, soprano, 78; **Dervla Kirwan**, actress, 28; **Kevin Kline**, screen actor, 52; **Reg Kray**, gangland criminal, 66; **Adrian Mitchell**, poet, 67; **Sir Fred Pontin**, holiday camp founder, 93; **Christopher Rodrigues**, chief executive, Bradford and Bingley Building Society, 50; **Mark Tulley**, broadcaster, 64; **Paul Vaughan**, radio journalist, 74; **Matthew Warchus**, theatre director, 33; **Bill Wyman**, Rolling Stone, 58.

Death Notices

FIRTH, Rev Cyril Bruce, aged 93 on October 19th, peacefully at Romsey Hospital. Funeral service at St Margaret's Church, Wellow, at 12 noon on Tuesday October 26th. Donations if desired to Wellow Church Fund.

RUSSELL-SAMPSON, Stephanie Katherine, peacefully on 19th October 1999 at Kingston Hospital, London. Her time on earth was done, she had other places to go. Love ya mum, from your family, Tamsin, Juliet, Dominic and Grandchildren. Any enquiries to James Smith Funeral Directors, Tel 01929 422445.

In Memoriam

FERNLEY, Denise, died 24/10/97. We've all felt such sorrow and sadness during the two years since we last saw you, sustained by our own precious memories of the love and joy you inspired. Rob, the family and friends.

■ To place your announcement telephone 0171 713 4567 or fax 0171 713 4707 between 9am and 3pm Mon-Fri.

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